Teaching the English Article System in Japanese Universities : A Phantom of the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

As a major component of the English language, the English article system receives little attention in university English classes in Japan. This seems a paradox in a country which strongly emphasizes that the learning of the English language remains essential in its drive toward internationalization and integration in the world community.

Using a survey as the basis of this paper, I will attempt to analyze some of the factors that lead university professors, both native and non-native speakers of English, to devote little classroom time to article instruction in Japan.

THE SURVEY

Professors of English, at universities chosen randomly from diverse geographic areas in Japan, responded to the questionnaire (Figure I) on their backgrounds, skills, and techniques as relating to teaching English articles in their classes.

Please circle the best response or answer the following:

1. Are you a native speaker of the English language?

YES **NO**

2. If you are not a native speaker, how long have you spent in an English-speaking country?

___week (s) ___month(s) ___year(s)

3. What kinds of English classes do you teach?

First-year	classes	Conversation	classes
Second-year	〃	Composition	〃
Third-year	〃	Language	〃
Fourth-year	〃	Literature	〃
Graduate	〃	Reading	〃
other: _____		Translation	〃
		Speech	〃
		Other: _____	

4. How would you rate your own knowledge of the English article system?

poor **fair** **good** **excellent**

5. How would you rate your ability to teach English articles?

poor **fair** **good** **excellent**

6. What percentage of class time do you allocate to teaching English articles?

___%

7. Which of the following techniques do you use in teaching the English article system?

grammatical explanations
completion/addition exercises
cloze passages
error correction
other: _____

8. Comments:

(Figure I)

Even though Japanese students begin learning English article usage in junior high school, I specifically chose to limit the survey to university professors for the following reasons:

1. I wanted the survey group to consist of teachers who have had the most exposure to the English language: university professors in

Japan have much more opportunity to study in English-speaking countries than do public school teachers; moreover, university professors have studied the English language much longer than public school teachers.

2. University professors in Japan have a great amount of academic freedom to choose what and how they teach in their classes unlike public school teachers who must follow the guidelines prescribed by the Ministry of Education.

3. University students in Japan have had the most exposure to English through study, homestay programs, and other types of foreign travel; hence, these students would seem to offer the most receptive group to learn article usage.

The questionnaire was kept to eight response areas in the hopes of maximizing professor response by keeping the survey as brief as possible to attenuate any feelings of intimidation generated by the appearance of a bulky, time-consuming questionnaire. The design of the questionnaire centered on the attempt to establish a correlation between the ability to use English articles and the willingness of a professor to teach them. To further enhance the probability of establishing the foregoing hypothesis, native English-speaking professors were also included in the survey, and questions one and two of the questionnaire solicit this background information. Question number three on the questionnaire sought information on the types and levels of classes taught by the respondents while questions four and five further attempt to clarify the ability and confidence the professor has in using and teaching the English article system. Question six surveys the amount of time used by respondents in teaching articles, and number seven follows up on the previous question by inquiring into specific methodologies. A comment section closes the questionnaire. Questions three and six may have been more effective if they had been combined so respondents could indicate in which class they teach articles and how much class time they use in each particular class.

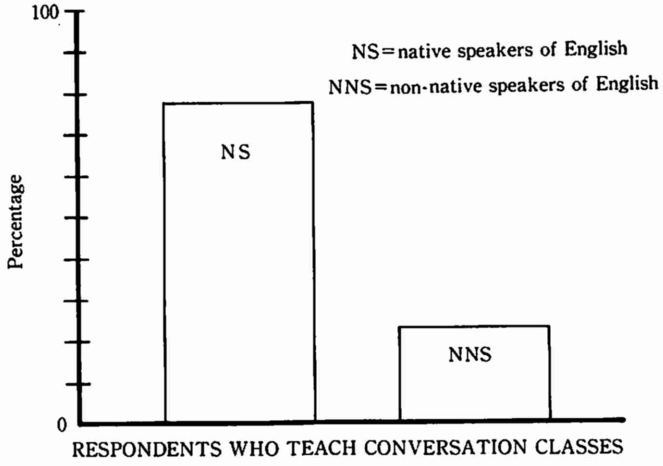
Question number seven would have been more effective if the respondents could rank in order of preference their teaching techniques rather than merely selecting those which they use.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the survey produced some surprising results.

SURVEY RESULTS

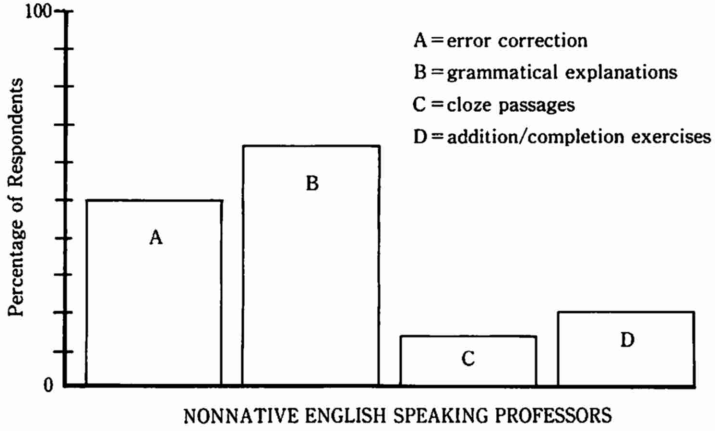
The results of the survey provided the surprising statistic that English professors in Japan spend on the average 3.5% of class time teaching English articles (ranging from 0% to 10% with forty-seven percent of the respondents indicating that they spend less than one percent of class time on articles). As mentioned earlier, a bias designed into the survey was the attempt to establish a correlation between English fluency and the willingness to teach articles. In an overview of the survey data, this hypothesis was not supported and quite the opposite appeared to be true: the survey results showed a clear tendency for non-native English-speaking professors to spend twice the class time on articles than their native English-speaking-colleagues (4% versus 1.9% of class time, respectively). Generally, in Japanese universities, native speakers of English teach the majority of conversation classes while their counterparts teach other areas of the curriculum, so when the foregoing statistic is adjusted to take this fact into account, it becomes less representative of the situation where in seventy-seven percent of native English-speaking professors surveyed-responded that they teach conversation classes compared to twenty-three percent for non-native speakers (see Figure II). When comparing non-native English-speaking professors to native English-speaking professors, class time spent on articles is nearly identical (2% versus 1.9%, respectively). This seems to offer little support for the hypothetical relationship between article fluency and willingness to teach them.

Another area of the survey which bears scrutiny are the techniques

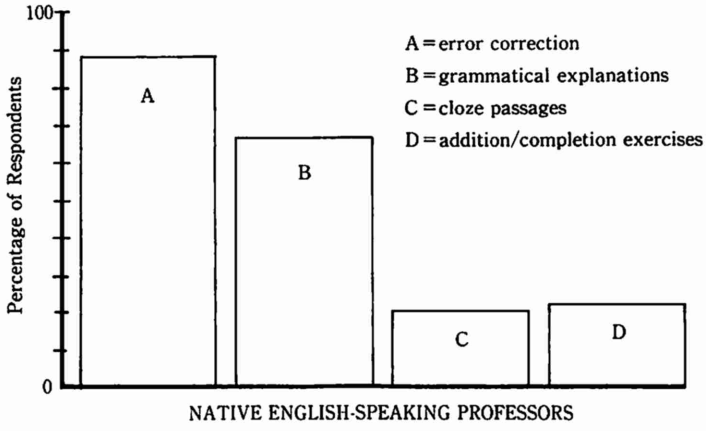


(Figure II)

used to teach the English article system in Japanese universities. As covered in question number seven of the questionnaire, fifty percent of non-native speakers indicated "error correction" as a technique used for teaching articles while native speakers indicated a whopping eighty-eight percentage: the most often cited technique for this group. In comparison, Figures IIIA and IIIB show that both groups almost equally chose "grammatical explanations" and "addition/completion exercises" for instructing in the use of English articles; in contrast, both groups diverge on selecting "cloze passages", with non-native speakers at fourteen percent and native speakers at twenty-two percent. Response to the "Comments" section shed little light on the phantom of Japanese university English classes: the English article system.



(Figure IIIA)



(Figure IIIB)

DISCUSSION

The foregoing statistics offer direct evidence that Japanese university English professors spend little time teaching the English article system. But, perhaps, this small percentage of time represents a fair allotment to such tiny and seemingly non-existent words (the zero article, for example, is not even represented by symbols). As minuscule and nebulous as the articles may seem physically, they are veritable titans in the structure of the language when considering Brender's point that "... the articles (a/an, the) are among the ten most frequently used words in the English language..." (I). In a similar vein, Pittman observes that

> The articles are among the most commonly used words in English at all levels of communication... In one form or another, these features are in almost every English sentence... their effect on meaning is enormous. (xiii)

With English articles functioning in such an essential linguistic capacity, what are the ramifications for the English classroom in the Japanese university environment? In a study of Japanese E.S.L. student errors, Bryant clearly recognizes that interlingual errors such as article misuse"... do the most to hinder comprehension and clear communication, and which most confuse the anglophone listener" (2). Other authorities cite L2 learners' problems with articles as "formidable" (Whitman 253) or an "extremely difficult obstacle to overcome" (Brender 1). But the results of this survey would suggest that professors find them equally formidable to teach since they spend such a small percentage of class time on their instruction. Why should this be? And why do native speakers, who have no problem using articles, also spend little time on them? Master points out that

> The English article system is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar for non-native speakers and one of the latest to be fully acquired. It appears deceptively easy to most native speakers, who usually have difficulty articulating the rules for article usage much beyond 'it sounds right'. (461)

Teachers who feel insecure in their knowledge of articles or shy away from teaching them can take heart in knowing that the complexities of article grammar have defied a legion of taxonomists. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman comment on the difficulties inherent in classifying the many article uses:

> Both structural and transformational grammarians have been largely unsuccessful with regard to explicating article usage. One reason for this is that neither school of analysis goes beyond the sentence level, and in article usage-to a great extent-we depend on the discourse context to determine what is definite and what is indefinite. (172)

Two other problems compound the situation for the conversation teacher and student: first, articles ghost in and out of spoken English due to their unstressed positions in phrases, making these phantoms difficult for students to acknowledge their very existence. The only time that articles receive stress would be in the infrequent uses such as when a speaker strives for verbal emphasis in a humorous, ironic, or sarcastic utterances. Secondly, few E.S.L. textbooks on articles haunt the publishing houses, leaving the teacher and student scant support materials. Likewise, out of this void, no time-proven methodology has arisen. Most textbooks either ignore articles, touch upon articles lightly, or present them in such complicated explanations that overwhelm the teacher and leave the student bewildered. Some attempts, however, to develop a coherent system to teach articles strike closer to the heart of the problem by trying to pare the many article uses down to the bone: to the most frequent and explainable. Whitman con-

structs a six-point system that describes the article's aspect, moving from *quantity* (countable nouns, both singular and plural) and ending with the *generic* usage which he recommends delaying considerably in a teaching program (258-261). More recently, Master argues that the English articles may be taught"... in a binary classification/identification dichotomy... in which *a*/*ϕ* [*ϕ represents the zero article*] *has one clear role and the* another" (476). But Master admits that some aspects fall outside his schema and have to be addressed separately such as intentional vagueness, idiomatic phrases, and proper nouns (476). And, unfortunately for teachers, both of the foregoing researchers only present abbreviated suggestions on applying their systems in the classroom.

In *The Grammar Book*, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman assert that merely identifying the noun or noun phrase and prior referents fails to explain the intricate thought processes that culminate in article selection—processes that involve the listener as much as the speaker (177, 183). Pica argues along a similar line of thought and insists that discourse-related rules, rather than sequential systems, and relevance of teaching materials are necessary to engender natural acquisition of articles (232).

The Japanese language offers a relevant parallel to the thought processes involved in article selection in its use of the postposition markers *Wa* and *Ga*. When asked to explain the use of *Wa* and *Ga*, many Japanese will respond that "you must have a feeling for *Wa* and *Ga*." In one basic use of these markers, *Ga* introduces new information—and once the introduction is complete—then *Wa* is used for subsequent mention. This feature in the Japanese language seems to allow students to readily grasp the following article usage: *A* car struck my house. *The* car started on fire. Brender constructs a methodology that incorporates some of the thought processes involved in article selection by charting some of the input necessary for students to learn the "feeling" for articles. Although, flow charts and other visual

representations of article function are nothing new, Brender's book specifically targets the Japanese classroom, and his chart is designed for students to use in conjunction with the text; moreover, it makes good use of cloze passages — a technique that places last in the survey behind error correction, grammatical explanations, and addition/completion exercises for both subgroups (see Figures IIIA and IIIB). Cloze passages, unlike addition/completion drills, place the student into context where they have the opportunity to undergo the mental processes required during article selection. And cloze passages are fun. The majority of grammar studies or addition/completion drills usually employ ingenuous, boring constructions, but a cloze passage can be taken from any relevant piece of literature that students — and teachers — may find challenging, exciting, or even risque which may set the stage for stimulating class discussion.

As the survey revealed, eighty-eight percent of native English-speaking professors indicated "error correction" as one technique in teaching articles (see Figure IIIB) compared to fifty percent for their non-native speaking colleagues (Figure IIIA). A strong sixty percent of both survey subgroups indicated "grammatical explanations" as another technique. What astonishing figures. Generally, in E.S.L. pedagogy, grammatical explanations and, even more so, error correction receive notice as the least effective means for encouraging language production. Naturally, in a composition class, teachers need to mark student errors in their manuscripts, and when Japanese students write in English, article misuse and abuse literally leap off the pages (Tate 1-3). But why do thirty-eight percent more native English-speaking professors use "error correction" than non-native English-speaking professors? As shown in Figure II, native English-speaking professors teach the bulk of conversation classes at university in Japan and appear to be using "error correction" as a teaching technique. So why would a technique denounced as a "no-no" in professional T.E.S.O.L. circles receive a following in Japan? One

explanation for this phenomenon centers on university hiring practices: foreign faculty are often hired firstly because they are native speakers of English, and secondly for their academic credentials. This practice (by no means utilized at all universities and coming under criticism at others) finds professors essentially teaching E.S.L. and sometimes other English courses that lie outside their own academic fields. It is not unusual to find professors of Psychology, Special Education, Speech, Anthropology or any other area teaching conversation classes in Japan. Outside of the foreign language class, professors normally correct student errors when they encounter them: Algebra students would never escape reciting the plus or minus signs incorrectly in an equation, nor would an E.S.L. student escape correction when misusing definite and indefinite articles.

A second explanation questions the statistic itself. As any observer of the presidential election process in the United States would note, statistics can be made to dance to any advantageous tune. So if eighty-eight percent of native English-speaking professors indicate they use "error correction" and at the same time indicate only 3.5% of class time spent on teaching articles, this perspective finds error correction being used very little, and the sanctum of E.S.L. pedagogy remaining inviolate.

The third and probably best explanation focuses on the abilities of native English speakers, who, according to Hewson, demonstrate "... a remarkable facility [to use articles] not found to the same degree in other language communities..." (99) Hence, native speakers can hear the phantom article being misused much more easily and more often than non-native English-speaking professors, and, perhaps, accounting for some of the 38 point difference between these two survey subgroups.

CONCLUSION

Although the survey results show that the majority of English professors in Japan allocate little time to the use of articles, they are

not necessarily guilty of professional misconduct since the study of the role of articles within the fabric of discourse has been only a relatively recent research endeavor; moreover, few practical materials — or any kind of consensus over methodology — have yet to evolve in the field. English professors probably make few demands on ELT publishers for materials when they often comment to the effect that they are so preoccupied with such remedial problems as simple verb tenses, vocabulary, and pronunciation that no time is left for more complicated matters like articles. Hence, publishers see little economic gain in selling a product in a phantom market. The near future will probably see the most change coming in the realm of interactive computer software rather than published texts. For the time being, teachers can make use of some of the materials extant and benefit their students by making more use of cloze passages along the lines of those in the Brender book (*Three Little Words*) which represents a step in the right direction for creating a suitable methodology. Hopefully, the English article system will become less of a phantom and more of a friend to university English classes in Japan.

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